



PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

Berea Police Officer
Chris Neal

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Young and enthusiastic at only 25 years old, Berea Police Department Officer Chris Neal is living his lifelong dream. As a little boy growing up in Lexington, Neal dreamed of being a police officer with a fast car and shiny badge. After moving to Berea and spending two years at Eastern Kentucky University, he joined the Berea Police Department, where he has served for two and a half years. His zeal for the job, and his desire to make Berea the best possible place to raise a family, make this young officer an asset to his agency and community.

Going to the basic training academy was my honeymoon. My wife, Chelsea, and I were engaged for a year and a half. The hiring process at Berea took six to eight months. I remember the chief called and said, ‘You got the job and you’re going to the academy July 2.’ We got married June 30. We literally had Saturday and Sunday, and then Monday morning I started the academy. It was harder on Chelsea because we had just bought a house and she was by herself. But I was up here with a good group of guys, and having those people around me for support helped out a lot.

After the academy, when you start your first day at work, you feel like you’re able to handle the job, but once you’re sitting in the seat of the car and your FTO is sitting beside you, not saying anything, just expecting you to go out and pull people over, it’s extremely nerve racking. There were times I forgot I had a siren and lights. It was weird pulling people over. From not being able to do that before to having the ability to enforce the law, that was nerve racking at first.

Policing is almost in your blood. You won’t be rich. People don’t wave with all five fingers anymore; they look at you differently. But there’s something that makes you want to get out and do this job. The thing that keeps me around is I enjoy meeting people, talking to people and letting them know who I am and the life I come from.

I think my biggest challenge initially was dealing with people who are older than me. I’m only 25 years old. When you have to tell an older person what to do, that is someone who used to tell you what to do and you’re

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telling them they need to do this or that; that was difficult. When you put the badge on your persona has to change. You’re a police officer and you stand for the law and for what’s good. You have to enforce that.

Berea is a great place to work. It has a small town feel, but we are able to stay busy enough that you are not bored to tears. I’ve never considered going anywhere else. Berea is where I like to be. It is home and where I can see myself raising my family. Working where you live, you’ll put more effort in because you know that’s where your family is, and you want them to be safe.

I had my first experience with that a month ago. It’s 8 a.m. and I’m just driving through town. Nothing much is going on. I’m thinking about court later that day. Suddenly a tone drops — Signal 9 — a male subject wanting to commit suicide in his Jeep in front of his house.

We get those calls all the time; it’s a pretty normal call, but to show up and see the gun, the guy’s face and the bullet in the roof of the car was a situation I’d never dealt with before. Other officers on scene had dealt with that situation before — but for me, seeing it for the first time, it hit me all of a sudden.

I have to say, you have to have a very good support system — it’s everything. It was hard at first. I’ve always been the kind of person to keep feelings inside and then let them out all at once. Now I’ll come home and talk to my wife and she’ll ask me how my day is going. I could tell her anything and she’ll support me 100 percent.

At the Berea Police Department, you’re really close to your shift while working. There also is a group of people I’ve become closer with, and we’ll do things together outside of work. There is a group of guys who work out together, and we used to play basketball as a relief mechanism to relieve what we’d seen and our experiences of the day.

We have a lot of younger officers. We rely a lot on older officers. Some are retired and have come back for second jobs. Those people are good to go to because they’ve seen it and can give you a lot of support and help you along the way if you have any questions. A good thing about BPD is I could call anyone at any time, day or night, and they would be there. It’s an unspoken bond — they would be there for you, no matter what it was.

The rest of my family has been on the other side of law enforcement — my father died from a drug overdose when I was 11. My mom and brother have been hooked on [drugs] in the past. I’ve always steered clear of that, and seeing them is something that led me to not mess with that stuff. I try to emphasize that with people. I try to let people know that I’ve lived with it; it was my brother, mom, father — I was able to come out of it and you’re able to as well.

I honestly believe I police differently from others because of those past experiences. When I go out and talk to people, I try to relate to them on a different level. I think instead of having bad people, we have people who make bad decisions. You always can change bad decisions, you just need someone to speak to you and show you a different way of doing things. When someone is in your backseat, instead of taking him straight to jail, maybe try to talk to him while you’re there. Maybe something you say will make an impression on him and maybe change his life.

Before this job, I never owned a gun and never went out and shot to hit a target. The first day on the job, they give you two hand guns, a shot gun and an AR and you feel like this is the craziest first day I’ve ever had. Then I went to basic training and finished in the top three in our class in firearms. 🇺🇸

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